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May 17, 2012

Dear Chairman Johnson:

Attached please find my written responses to the questions posed by Committee Members for the record. Please let me know if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

Nicole Maestas
Senior Economist
Director, RAND Center for Disability Research

United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Social Security
Hearing on Securing the Future of the SSDI Program
March 20, 2012

Questions Submitted for the Record

Questions from Chairman Johnson Followed by Response from
Dr. Nicole Maestas, Senior Economist, RAND Corporation

1) In Ms. Ekman's testimony, she provides a critique of your research. Would you like to respond? How can statistical research be used to inform disability policy?

Statistical research is one of our most powerful tools for informing disability policy. Statistical research has the great advantage of enabling us to draw objective, evidence-based conclusions about policy matters. Perhaps more importantly, statistical research embodies rigorous protocols for determining whether a particular conclusion can be generalized to the larger population. Statistical research helps avoid the pitfalls of the anecdotal approach, where the experience of a single case or small group of cases is used to draw (often incorrect) inferences about an entire program or population. Our approach is rooted in the long-established statistical principle of random assignment, which provides a simple method for drawing sound inferences about the program, without the need to review individual disability cases. This same statistical principle underlies randomized controlled trials, which form the gold standard for scientific inference in medical science. Ms. Eckman expresses uncertainty about the proper interpretation of our findings. My written testimony provides the proper interpretation in careful detail.

2) In his testimony, Dr. Chan spoke about the shifting paradigms of disability, saying "the way disability is conceptualized and measured has changed dramatically in the past 50 years." Do you have anything to add to Dr. Chan's assessment? What ideas do you have for how to improve the program?

I would only highlight Dr. Chan's citation of the IOM statement that "disability is not a stable attribute across situations, since physical and mental functioning is influenced by environments." Environmental factors include advances in medical and surgical treatments that increase the likelihood of some degree of recovery. Our current disability evaluation system, however, is based on the notion of a disability being "permanent" if it is expected to last longer than 12 months. This is an area where much more research is needed to understand the dynamics of and interaction between particular health impairments and different work environments.

3) Based on your experiences, how would you define disability?

The integration of the new International Classification of Functioning (ICF) into medical education and practice is an advance (Dr. Chan's testimony provides an overview of the ICF), since it highlights the interactions between environmental and personal factors, activities, and health when determining disability. A further advance would be to acknowledge disability as a dynamic process, rather than a state. This process framework would offer a blueprint for designing evaluative systems that can measure and perhaps even facilitate improvement.